

Jim O'Driscoll
Vakgroep Engels
Universiteit Gent

English in Europe: Is it taking over?

1. English everywhere

- (1) GREAT NIGHT, RARE TASTE
- (2) THE NEW SONY XLI: WELCOME TO THE PURE SOUND.
- (3) STREET FIGHTER II: Only by your local dealer.
- (4) MOVIES WISHES YOU A MERRY X-MAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR

The above are all faithful reproductions of texts which I have seen in the past few years. (1) is an advertisement for whisky on a hoarding; (2) is an advert on the outside of a tram; (3) is one on the inside of a tram; (4) is a message sprayed onto a shop window. It will probably not surprise you to learn that I found all of them in the city of Ghent. And yet none of them exhibit any sign of the Dutch language whatsoever. As you can see, they are all entirely in English. It is also worth noting that at least two of them are not merely imports of texts distributed internationally, but rather were produced here in Flanders. This is obviously the case with (4), since it is a local shop, but it is also true of (3), where the use of *by*, with its similarity to the Dutch *bij*, suggests very strongly that it was produced by a native Dutch speaker (a native English speaker would write *at*).

There are signs of English everywhere in the Flemish language community. Go to the cinema and you will almost certainly find yourself listening to an English script. Turn on the radio and it is more than likely you will be listening to English song lyrics. Pay attention to your TV for any length of time and you will encounter many English words, not just when British or

66

65

American programmes are being shown but even when communal (Flemish) events are being televised, such as when the comper of a New Year party celebration shouts *Everybody put your hands together and clap*. Occasionally, you can see advertisements on the TV which, though they are aimed exclusively at Flemish consumers, are scripted entirely in English (see below). Oh, and if you look at the listings in magazines, you will find that a very large proportion of programmes bear English titles. Listen to groups of people talking, especially teenagers, and you find their conversation peppered with English phrases.

Of course, Flanders is by no means unique in this respect. Similar examples can be found all over Europe. For example, there is a widespread tendency for "Norwegian companies reaching out for a Norwegian public in Norwegian [media]... to name their goods and advertise in English" (Wiggen 1995:74). In Switzerland there is an increasing tendency for it to appear on public notices, alongside the official French and German but to the exclusion of the official Italian (Davidson 1995). In Sarajevo, "seemingly as remote from English-speaking culture as any place in Europe", Bryson (1990:173) notes graffiti saying *Heavy metal is law* and *Hooligan kings of the north*. In the centre of Budapest I recently saw a toy shop entitled *Toy Farm* and next to it a clothing store the only writing above whose front read *Diesel ... Nuclear Free Zone ... Original ... Store*. "Many inroads" are at present being made by English in Slovenia (Tollefson 1997).

Nor should it be thought that the phenomenon is restricted to the smaller countries and language communities of Europe. More than a quarter of German TV listings display an English title (Hilgendorf 1996) and anglicisms appear in advertising texts almost as frequently as they do in Flanders. Smith (1997), reporting from Madrid after 15 years of living there, speaks of teenagers peppering their conversation with lots of *hellos* and *okays*, of a prestigious Spanish magazine employing hosts of anglicisms and of mobile phone businesses entitled *Motorstar* and

Motorline. Ross (1997) points out the plethora of English public signs and notices in the suburb of Milan where he lives and claims that in some blocks of the city as many as half of all signs are in English. In France, despite the widespread practice of dubbing on TV, three-quarters of foreign films at the cinema, about half of the total number screened, are shown in their original language with subtitles, and in the vast majority of cases, this language is English (Fraitz 1988:74-82).

2. Reactions

As the 21st century gets into its stride, there exists a widespread perception, among both language professionals and the general European public at large, that the English language is 'taking over'. This view goes far beyond the observation that English is the most common linguistic means of international communication. English seems to be invading the territories of other languages, sometimes even displacing them in settings of everyday local use.

Now, people and societies often invest a great deal of their identity in their language. It is therefore not surprising that this perceived English 'invasion' has sparked against it. Ross (1997) speaks of a partial "return to more homely, traditional Italian signs" in public. Ridder (1995) notes a rising groundswell against the English titling of TV programmes in the Netherlands: outside the station in Ghent a few years ago, an advert for Eurostar whose only slogan read *Highway to Harrods* had a flyer stuck across it with the word *Nederlands* on it.

These reactions sometimes take place at the institutional level too. It is well-known that France has a language purity law which requires that a French translation be provided for any advertising copy in English. A similar law has recently been passed in Poland and has recently been proposed in Germany by the federal interior minister (Griffin 2001).

Such actions testify to a rising level of concern about the domination of the English language in public life in these countries. Are these concerns justified? Is English really taking over? Is it really displacing the other languages of Europe? And if it is, should something be done to stop it?

3. A study of public promotional texts

The most ubiquitous and immediate signs of English are to be found in adverts and other public promotional texts. Over the past several years, I have been studying these, in Flanders and some other places around Europe. The evidence which I have collected suggests that the use of English is certainly very widespread. At the same time, however, it is clearly limited in its scope. In general, it is confined to what may be described as an iconic or ritualistic function, in which meaning is either clear from context or minimal. It is only very occasionally used for genuine provision of information, and only sometimes used for slogans or other kinds of persuasion.

The most frequent use of English in public contexts is, in fact, for naming. There is a notable tendency of public bodies in Flanders to adopt English names for their products. Thus NMBS offers a *Go Pass*, a *Golden Rail Pass*, a *Sorry Pass* (after they have been on strike) and other special deals, all in English. Designated set-down points outside the stations of Gent and Brugge are indicated by the legend *Kiss and Ride*. Information on posters and leaflets concerning the temporary ice rink put up in the central market square of Brugge at the end of 1997 was all in Dutch, as was the persuasive slogan *Schaatsplezier in open lucht*, but the enterprise itself was proudly entitled *Christmas On Ice*.

To put some flesh on the bones of these generalisations, I discuss below a series of adverts (see O'Driscoll 1999:128-140 for more examples).

[Jim O'Driscoll: *English in Europe: Is it taking over?* 107

3.1. *Two adverts at Gent St. Pieters*

Tot 70% goedkoper ballen
[Picture of phonecard showing THE PHONECARD IN TOUCH TELECOM on it]
Te koop aan de loketten Langer ballen naar het buitenland voor dezelfde prijs THE PHONECARD IN TOUCH TELECOM

Here, an English name has been chosen for a product that is exclusive to Belgium. But that is the only English element. Both the two clauses designed to encourage us to buy it (*Tot 70% ... / Langer ballen ...*) and the information about how to buy it (*Te koop ...*) are in Dutch. This ad exemplifies a very common pattern in posters and leaflets in Flanders, in which only the name of the product is in English.

But it is also quite common for slogans to appear in English, especially when the product being advertised is associated with an English-speaking country, as in this next example.

TOT 10 TREINEN PER DAG NAAR HARTJE LONDEN
[Eurostar logo]
ONLY IN LONDON
ONLY 2H40 AWAY
Meer info en reserveringen op uw station of uw reisbureau of op [phone no.] of op [website]

However, even here, we may notice limitations. The large-type slogans are not entirely in English - at least not native English. *H* is never used as an abbreviation for *hours* in native English countries. In addition, the other bit which is there to encourage consumption of the product (*Tot ...*) is in Dutch, as is the information about how to buy it (although admittedly in very small letters).

3.2. A Flemish party advert

However, for some types of popular entertainment, the use of English is more extensive. Here is an advert, which appeared in both leaflet and poster form, for a New Year's Eve event:

Oudejaarsgala

22h30 - 5 Zalen
31 DECEMBER '97 - Schuttershof (St.-Kruis)
CYBER ROOM FOOD & BREAKFAST BAR NEW YEAR'S HALL
[list of DJ names & credentials]

TRANCE - DANCE - CLUB ROOMBASTIC THIS SOUND BY DELTA VOX BELGIUM
TECHNO - RETRO HOUSE MEDICAL LIGHT SHOW (SCANS, STROBOS, PANS)
DJ LINE UP [list of names & credentials]

FOR MORE DETAILS READ MOVE X NEW YEAR'S DECOR AND FREE GADGETS
SPECIAL CYBER LIGHT SHOW

PRE HISTORIE SWING CAFE COCKTAILBAR and CHAMPAGNE
DJ WILLEM [credentials] BY Laurent Perrier [logo]
LOUNGE SPECIAL DECOR

WIN VAN 22 NOV. TOT 22 DEC. Bezoek ons op Internet: Saddeleltij gewerst
DAGELIJKS TUSSEN 17 EN 20 UUR [website address] BUS SERVICE ALL NIGHT
REDUCTIEKAARTEN VIA [logo] Schuttershof - Biekorf
't Zand - Schuttershof

VOORVERKOOP: 450,- (inclusief bon voor gratis Clean hamburger from Quick, Simpsons pen!
en win [link to Dutch])
[list of places where tickets available]
AAN DE DEUR: 600,-

It is notable here that two of the same referents appear in both Dutch and English (*Oudejaar - New Year / zaal - room*). The way they are employed exemplifies the tendency whereby titles are often English while information-provision is in Dutch. We are informed about what sort of product is being advertised (*Oudejaarsgala*) and given some basic information about its size (5 *Zalen*) in Dutch, while the names which have been given to the

zalen themselves tend to use English, as in *Cyber Room, New Year's Hall* and *Food & Breakfast Bar*.

But in this ad we also see English used for other functions. For example, we are encouraged to visit one of the rooms by being told that it has *New Year's Decor and Free Gadgets*. In addition, it is used with a largely informative function. This is to be seen in the liberal use of grammar words such as *by* and *and* (as opposed to *&*), and more noticeably it is there in *Bus Service, All Night*. Most significantly, it makes one appearance in a complete finite clause: *For more details, read ...* Thus it would appear that in some areas, English may creep into stretches of text which are essentially for the provision of information.

However, it is worth noting at this point that English is not the only 'other' language which can be involved in this kind of advertising in Flanders. In another leaflet for a different event on the same night (also in Brugge), this other language was confined entirely to titles (all information provision and encouragement being in Dutch), but it was French rather than English which fulfilled this function. The title of this event was *Changé!* and of the eight rooms (8 *Zalen*) listed, only one of them - *Zaal Windsor* - had an English connotation. Four of the other seven had unambiguously French connotations (*Molière / Voltaire / Racine / Belle Époque*), one had a double French/Dutch connotation (*Zaal Water'au*) and another had a faint French connotation (*Zaal Ambassadeur*).¹

¹ The difference in the use of languages between the two leaflets reflects a difference in the events. The second event was more up-market, being more expensive and including a set banquet, while the first merely offered a free hamburger token. English represents a specifically lowbrow kind of popular entertainment, in contrast to the high-culture associations of French.

3.3. A German magazine

It is perhaps not surprising that in the territory of one of Europe's relatively small languages, other languages should make their appearance in public advert texts. But what about adverts in the territory of a larger language? *Stadt Revue*, subtitled *Kölns Stadtillustrierte*, is published monthly in Cologne and concerned mainly with cultural and entertainment events in and around the city. My study of the 18 full-page and double-spread adverts in the November 1997 edition found essentially the same division of labour between a foreign language, usually English, but occasionally French, and the national/local language. Again, it is in an advert for an event that a foreign language is most evident.

SECOND HAND MODEMARKT & Avantgarde News

FIRST CLASS SECOND HAND, NEWS CLUB WEAR, AUSGEFLIPPTES RECYCLING WEAR, LEDER FASHION 70's STYLE, ROARING 60's, SCHNAPPECK	AVANTGARDE-DESIGNER FASHIONS WORKWEAR - DIE WILDEN 50ER JAHRE, TECHNO, FOOTWEAR, STREET WEAR FUNDSACHEN, KINDER SECOND HAND
UNDERWEAR, ACCESSORIES and more	LIFESTYLE, SECOND SEASON
Sonderkhan	Mode in Übergrößen
Special Kostüm-Show Event	SINNLUST - dressed up for love, peace and revolution
Teil 2 - Das Happening geht weiter	Freitag Schüler- und Studentenag
Café et défilé par RALOTH-Kontime	Ernährungslehre
(Kostümhelder von Helga von Sinnen und Lilo Wanders)	
täglich um 16.00, 19.00 und 22.00 Uhr	
Sonntag letzte Show um 21.00 Uhr	
7.-9. NOVEMBER '97	KÖLN, SARTORY SALE
Öffnungszeiten: Fr. & Sa. 14.00 - 24.00 Uhr / So. 11.00 - 22.00 Uhr	
Kartenverkauf bei allen bekannten CTS - Vorverkaufsstellen	
INFO HOTLINE 0201 - 778277, [internet address]	
Eine Produktion von STAMM & BELZ Concerts & Events	

The naturalisation of English in this kind of context is highlighted by the fact that the list of features near the top of this ad, expressed mainly in that language, includes the self-conscious play on words in *first class second hand* and the fact that the only stretch of German which is longer than an isolated word has inverted commas round it.

However, once again, when we come to the provision of practical information about place and times etc., it is all in German (with the single, possible, exception of *hotline*). The fact that the name of one feature at this event is named *Big is beautiful* but is then glossed with *Mode in Übergrößen* is perhaps indicative of the dividing line between the language used when associative meaning is to the fore, i.e. English, and that used when the provision of hard information is intended, i.e. German.

3.4. The general picture

In terms of the division of labour for English and the national language, the overall picture of the adverts studied in this German magazine is largely the same as it is in Flanders. Adverts for local products/services often give English-sounding names to what they are promoting but otherwise largely stick to the national language. If the product is a luxury one and/or fashionable and/or international, and especially if it is hi-tech, adverts for it may employ English for persuasion as well. If, but only if, the advert is for some form of popular entertainment, some of the relatively 'pure' information-provision may also be rendered in English.

3.5. MacDonalds and Humo on Flemish TV

So far, we have seen English used in these public texts only in a limited way. In addition, my studies show that English is hardly ever used in extended stretches of text. That is, longer texts may

have lots of English phrases and even whole clauses, but these are always embedded in the local/national language. However, a small number of cases can be found in which the whole text is in English. In late 1997/early 1998 two adverts were repeatedly shown on Flemish TV which were almost entirely in English. One of these was for MacDonalds, an admittedly international product, but the other was for the Dutch-language magazine Humo, an exclusively local product.

The MacDonalds ad features two men driving in a car having a conversation entirely in American English in the style and manner of the gangsters in the contemporary film *Pulp Fiction*. Their conversation is subtitled in Dutch, thus enacting the way in which Flemish viewers would have experienced the original film. The only other evidence of Dutch is the three-second written and spoken message about a special offer at MacDonalds which occurs near the end of the ad.

The Humo advert features the British TV comedians Mel Smith and Gyrf Rhys-Jones. It centres around the message that *reading Humo can have serious consequences*. The dialogue is entirely in English and there are no subtitles. Even the voice-over at the end of the ad repeats the central message in English, while a written Dutch version of it appears on the screen, thus being the only evidence of Dutch in the whole advert.

Despite the very extensive and extended use of English in these two adverts, and the consigning of Dutch to an apparently minor role, there are several reasons why it would be mistaken to take their appearance as a sign that English is becoming a possible 'normal' medium for advertising in Flanders on a par with Dutch.

First of all, it is notable that Dutch, although playing a minimal role in terms of quantity, is nevertheless given a 'capping' function through its appearance in written form at the end of each advert. Indeed, all the writing in the ads is in Dutch, and the written form of language always tends to carry more

weight than the spoken form. Through these means, it is implied that it is the comparatively serious Dutch message that has to be remembered.

In contrast, and secondly, the English is where the fun is. Indeed, the characters which appear in these adverts are all 'figures of fun'. The gangsters are amusing because, just as in the film, their style of speech and (even more so) their topic of conversation, about the fast-food eating habits of the Belgians, is incongruous from the viewpoint of the stereotype gangster image. Smith and Jones are amusing because they are amusing - they're comedians, that's what they do. They and the gangsters are not serious and therefore, unlike the final messages in Dutch, carry no stamp of authority.

Indeed, and thirdly, the characters are not merely laughable; the advertisers have taken care to present them in a specifically negative light. The gangsters, who are professional hit-men and thus the epitome of violence, betray themselves as clearly 'other' by describing the Belgian habit of putting mayonnaise on their *fries* as *naasty*. They also make a derogatory reference to a *McBelgium* and show themselves to be ignorant louts who have *no f***** idee* where Belgium is. The Humo ad opens with Mel Smith holding a copy of the magazine, explaining to viewers that he has been asked to warn them *reading Humo can have serious consequences*. But he has to admit to ignorance because he can't read Dutch. But then, as he flicks through the pages, he comes across the English phrase *fick Oasis* (the pop music band). Apparently fascinated to have encountered this phrase, he repeats it; whereupon Rhys-Jones, dressed as a policeman, accuses him and demands to know if he said *fick Oasis*. When he admits that he did, Rhys-Jones punches him on the nose saying *wel, fick you* (thereby proving the warning). Thus Smith becomes the victim of violence, making it impossible for him to have any vestige of authority, and Jones display loutish behaviour by perpetrating

violence. In both ads, the loudness is accentuated by the use of the swear word.

It can be seen, therefore, that the use of English in these adverts, albeit extensive, is strongly associated with 'otherness', ignorance and violence. The suggestion that it could be a norm in this genre is thereby avoided.

4. Some misconceptions about the 'English invasion'

My evidence indicates that, for public texts on the European continent, the English language is employed for specific, and therefore limited, purposes only. In this context at least, there is no evidence of a general drift to English. So why all the fuss? Why are so many people worried about it? The answer, I think, is to be found in our received wisdom about the modern world, in which the influence and power of English is a phenomenon of common knowledge. As such, it receives scholarly attention of a kind that no other language could. The journal *English Today*, for example, feels entitled to view the whole world as its canvas, not just the British Isles, North America and Australasia. Another journal has the title *World Englishes*. Few other languages could support a journal with *world* in its title, and no others could use that plural, testifying to the enormous variety of English use. No other language could generate such an encyclopaedic work as the recent *Dictionary of European Anglicisms* (Görfach 2001).

In my opinion, the resultant inevitable focus in scholarship such as this encourages several kinds of error regarding the detection of the *spread of English* and attitudes towards it, with consequently misinformed calls for efforts to halt it. I deal with these below.

4.1. Use of English?

One kind of error relates the extent of English influence. It may be expressed by the equation:

$$(use\ of)\ an\ etymologically\ English\ item = (use\ of)\ English$$

This attitude is simply wrong. Modern culture has created a vast number of international words. Most of these may be readily identifiable as originating from a specific language, but they have come to occupy their 'own' place in a host of languages - a place which varies from language to language (Ivir 1988), or even within varieties of the same language.² To be sure, the fact that most of these modern coinages in European languages are of English origin tells us something about recent movements of cultural transfer, but that does not mean that their use in one of these languages automatically signifies a switch to the use of English.

Take, for example, the word *lazer* in Modern Greek. This is the normal way in Greece of referring to the UCLES First Certificate in English exam. It used to be called the *Lower Certificate in English*. The title was officially changed some 25 years ago, but by this time the exam had become so well-known in Greece that *lazer* has been retained in Greek discourse. This etymology is a clear indication of English cultural hegemony in the field of education.³ But to regard a Greek speaker as switching to English when they employ the word *lazer* would be ridiculous - it means something totally different from what it means in English speech.

² There are, for example, cases of specifically East German meanings for words of English origin - see Clyne 1993.

³ Nationally produced EL exams did not have the same prestige or instrumental value.

One could make the same remark about the word *light* as given to products in Flanders. Clearly, this is a word of English origin, but nobody in Britain or America refers to *light cheese* - they would say *low fat* instead. The same may be noted of numerous other words. An example is *smoking* to refer to a garment. Its origin is the English *smoking jacket* but its articulation in several European languages as a single word means that its meaning is not immediately clear to a native English-speaker, so when an advert on a hoarding shows a picture of man wearing one with the legend *Smoking voor Kerst* (seen in Ghent in December 1997), it makes no sense to regard this as an English word in an otherwise Dutch text.

To put it another way, use of an anglicism in non-English speech is not the same thing as use of English any more than the use of phrases such as *déjà vu* or *fait accompli*, or any of the hundreds of other French-origin phrases often heard in English speech, can be taken as instances of English speakers slipping into French. In both cases, such items are the normal way of referring to something and their pronunciation is normally nativised.

Unfortunately, however, the attitude against which I have argued here is both reflected and encouraged by the intellectual titling of many scholarly studies. Consider for example, the following: "The cultural and linguistic context of English in West Germany" (Berns 1988), "English in Italy" (Pulcini 1994), "Global English invades Poland" (Griffin 1997), "English in Dutch" (Ridder 1995), "The Impact of English in Germany" (Hilgendorf 1996), "English in European Spanish" (Smith 1997), "Global English invades Bulgaria" (Griffin 2001).

All these articles focus mainly or entirely on the interpolation of anglicisms into the texts of the languages dominant in the various European countries they treat. None discuss, and most do not even allude to, the use of extended stretches of text in English, presumably because it is actually pretty rare. And yet all contain the word "English" in their titles.

Furthermore, this misleading use of the word is often compounded by alluding to the name of a country, e.g. Bulgaria, thus downplaying the fact that the interpolations of English which they address invariably take place within non-English texts.

The most spectacular example of this practice is Berns' (1992) study of the numerous English phrases to be found in German legal texts. Although it turns out that all of them are either already in general use in the German speech community or specialist jargon employed to refer to a 'new' legal concept, and although they are all items of three-words or less, the article is entitled "Bilingualism with English as the other tongue: English in the German legal domain".

This kind of conceptual error is the more insidious because, for the most part, the writers who commit it do not wish to promote English. Indeed, they often hold up the evidence of their findings as possible cause for alarm. Smith (1997), for example, rails against the widespread and increasing use of anglicisms in Spanish sports commentaries. He then remarks that "soon, Spanish sports commentators will only be comprehensible if one has a sound knowledge of English". The truth is rather that sports commentators the world over, in any language, are only comprehensible if one has a sound knowledge of the sport in question. Your English may be excellent, but how well would you understand a cricket commentary? Probably, you would find it utterly unintelligible - just as the millions of native English-speakers who have no interest in cricket would! The problem, as this comment exemplifies, is that we tend to place too much importance on words and not enough on meanings, forgetting that it is the latter, not the former, which people need to convey and understand.

4.2. English words?

The other kinds of error concern the meaning to be attached to the influence of English. One of them may be expressed as the tendency to assume that

(any item used in) English = (an item which is) *distinctively* English

When focusing on things pertaining to one culture or language, there is a danger of over-estimating their distinctiveness. Thus an American teenager, when asked to talk to a British camera in a programme for schools about language in America, was heard to say the following with reference to pop tarts: *You can put it in the microwave, you can put it in a toaster - [aside to friend] What do you call a toaster in England?*

Her friend informs her that it's called - surprise, surprise - a *toaster*. Similarly, the American Bill Bryson recounts how, newly-arrived in England, he was in conversation with other residents at a Dover boarding house, all English, who seemed amazed when he informed them that they had things like Woolworths and coniflakes in America too.

These two anecdotes exemplify the tendency to regard items which are in some way representative of the subject at hand as pertaining exclusively to the subject at hand. But just as toasters, Woolworths and coniflakes, though they are of American origin, are not uniquely American or uniquely British in their present-day occurrence, so many words, though they may have a clearly English origin, are also familiar to and commonly employed in many other languages. As such, they cannot be taken as distinctively English.

In Griffin's (1997) otherwise valuable analysis of the statistical frequency of anglicisms in Polish magazine adverts, he counts "any word that is a word in English - even if it is also a

word in French, German etc." as an instance of use of English, even an item such as *chauffeur*.

There is, of course, significance in the great extent of lexical borrowing that takes place these days across languages, but a more sophisticated approach to it is needed. For example, look back at the heading of the advert from the German magazine. What languages is it 'in'? *Second-hand* and *news* are English; *Modemarkt* is German - but then it is also Dutch, so perhaps we should describe it as 'continental West Germanic' or something like that; *avantgarde* is of course from French but it is used in so many languages that it would be meaningless to say that the advertisers are using French here. Another example can be found in the Eurostar advert. I have pointed out that 2H40 is not native English. But of course, it makes no sense to claim it is specifically Dutch either, since it is a common way of referring to times in writing in other European languages too.

In modern times, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of words which are used in a wide variety of languages. When they appear in texts, it makes no sense to claim that they exemplify a switch to English (or French, or Dutch, or anything else).

4.3. English values?

The characteristics associated with English language and culture have a tendency to fall prey to the same kind of conceptual error. This time, it may be expressed as

(values associated with) English = (values which are) *peculiarly* English.

Consider the use of anglicisms for taboo material. In both of the Flemish TV adverts discussed above, the word *fuck* is employed, in one of them repeatedly and in a manner which ensures that

attention is drawn to it. To my knowledge, the Dutch equivalent of this word has never been uttered on any advert on Flemish TV, and it is inconceivable that it ever would be. In similar vein, Berns (1988), in her discussion of anglicisms in Germany, cites evidence that for many people, some items with an English origin have associations of sexual immorality.

However, there is actually nothing special about English in this context. For modern continental Europeans, English certainly has associations of freedom from locally imposed restraints, sexual and otherwise. As such, taboo anglicisms are used most frequently by those who most frequently chafe at these restraints - the young. For example, of the group of Flemish teenagers which De Meulenaere (1995) studied, 100% and 65% respectively attested to their use of *shit* and *fuck* in everyday speech. But in fact any 'non-native' language would do for this purpose. These associations are carried by English because it is the most common foreign language, not because it is English. In Britain, the item *fuck* would never, ever, be used in a British TV commercial. There, the English language has no such licentious associations. For everybody in the world, it is simply the foreign-ness of a language which allows it to connote licence.

Thus the use of taboo words of English origin in continental Europe is simply a reflex of a widespread, perhaps universal, motivation for foreign language use - that of freedom from the social constraints associated with local language. The tool for this reflex happens to be of English origin, but it could, given different circumstances, be of some other origin. There is nothing intrinsic about the English language which makes it suitable for this purpose. Nor, it must be said, does the widespread use of English taboo words indicate a move towards adopting the cultural values associated with their use and thus the overturning of the locally imposed restraints. It is interesting that many of De Meulenaere's subjects commented that they would use the Flemish swear-word 'Godverdomme' far less frequently than

'shit' because they regarded it as much more serious and forceful. Thus the indigenous restraints remain in place.

4.4. *Intrinsic suitability?*

Many of the mistaken assumptions discussed above concerning the significance of the increasingly frequent use of anglicisms in other European languages bear witness to an approach to human phenomena in general that, throughout the last two centuries, has under-rated culture as a means of explanation. One reflex of this tendency is relevant here.

Opinions are sometimes heard that the reason for the spread of English is its intrinsic characteristics; that, for example, its vast vocabulary, lack of gender and simple flexible grammar make it easy to learn and thus eminently suitable for the role of world language (e.g. McCrum at al 1986). Writers chronicling the spread of anglicism in European languages frequently allude to the perceived brevity and precision which the use of such items allows. Smith (1997) makes reference to this with respect to Spanish, as do Berns (1988) and Hilgendorf (1996) for German. So too did a recent Sunday Times newspaper report (8/3/98:1) about German firms adopting English as their company language. Pulcini (1994) describes English lexis as "more economical and efficient" with respect to Italian. In all cases, the idea is that the L1 equivalent would require a cumbersome phrase of several words or even more.

The curious thing about these perceptions is that the matter seems to work the other way around as well. As any translator into English will tell you, it is often impossible to find single English words which will do for the single word in the original language. When asked by colleagues or students for an English word appropriate to the desired meaning, I frequently find myself having to provide a multi-word phrase, or even whole clause.

What this apparent contradiction does it to remind us that the frequent employment of anglicisms is primarily an 'effect', not a 'cause', of cultural hegemony. English phrases often seem snappier and more appropriate to continental Europeans than their native equivalents because the concepts for which they stand originated in English-language culture and were first articulated in English texts. These concepts are already there in the minds of their users and it is because there is a need to refer to them that anglicisms are employed. Certainly, their increased use makes these concepts more generally available to larger numbers of people, but it is not their use which brings the concepts into being in the first place.

5. Conclusion

My argument has been that the widespread anglicisms and other international borrowings in European languages cannot in themselves be said to carry a threat to the vitality of these languages. As Goethe and countless scholars since have argued, the importation of 'foreign' lexical items into a language is nearly always a matter of enrichment rather than impoverishment.

I do not, of course, mean to argue that the use of recognisably English words is insignificant. It is certainly indicative of larger cultural influences. In addition it can carry a pragmatic force, for example by evoking membership of a particular sub-culture, and among European youth it is widely attested as having this purpose.⁴ However, it is unhelpful to characterise it as switching to English. It is, rather, an instance of style-choice. Flemish and other European communities employ English words as a pragmatic resource. This resource is a matter of addition, not one of substitution. Indigenous words only rarely

⁴ E.g. Hess-Lüttich 1983 for Germany, De Meulenaere 1995:91-96 for Flanders, Smith 1997 for Madrid.

disappear as a result of the widespread adoption of English ones. Rather, the result is that the local repertoire is expanded. Even on the rare occasions when long stretches of English are employed, these function as an alternative style, not an alternative code. From this perspective, it is, moreover, unlikely that the present situation should be seen as a precursor to a 'real' English takeover in the future. Because the use of English phrases is a matter of style, their pragmatic force is specific to the local context, and this means that there can be a natural limit to their use. This can be illustrated by De Meulenaere's (1995) teenagers. English phrases are certainly well-established among them:

One pupil claimed that he wrote English slogans on folders. When I asked him why he wrote them in English, he answered 'because they just are in English'. [De Meulenaere 1995:93]

and when they wish to advertise a party which they are organising, they most frequently give it an English name.

Several students claimed that choosing English names for parties was something which was done unconsciously. One of them told me that they had been looking for a name themselves once and they had automatically come up with English ones. It was only after about the seventh name that someone suggested a Dutch one. [De Meulenaere 1995:100]

However, one of the original motivations for use of English phrases is that of being different, and this is subject to a law of diminishing returns. Thus

One of [the respondents] did not use the words 'happy' and 'cool' because these were too much associated with Beavis and Butt-head and there were too many people already who sounded like them. [De Meulenaere 1995:93-94].

Similarly

One of the informants claimed that if he was to throw a party, he would give it a French or Latin name. He would try not to use English because everybody uses English. [De Meulenaere 1995:105].

Thus, the present widespread use of English phrases and clauses in the contexts of other European languages has its own purposes which make sense only in these contexts. Therefore, it cannot be said to represent a wholesale adoption of the English language or the outlook on life associated with it.

Finally, it needs to be pointed out that English is making little or no headway in displacing the local mother-tongue anywhere in Europe as the medium for everyday interaction between friends, family members, local shopkeepers and customers, doctors and patients and so on. While many such encounters involve a peppering of recognisably-English phrases, these are always employed to achieve some special pragmatic effect. In my opinion, there are dangers in the present world effect of the English language, but these involve its dominance of the English language, but these involve its approaching monopoly in certain areas of international communication. As far as its supposed invasion of the territories of other European languages is concerned, the short answer to the question posed in the title of this article is no.

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